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SUBJECT: REP. DELAHUNT MEETS WITH CHAVEZ AND DEPUTIES

Classified By: Economic Counselor Andrew N. Bowen for Reason 1.4 (D)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Representative William Delahunt met separately with President Chavez, National Assembly Deputies, and opposition mayor Leopoldo Lopez on January 18. He also met separately with the families of three Colombian FARC hostages. During his private meeting with President Chavez, Delahunt discussed the coming U.S. elections, Chavez' continued attempts to negotiate the release of additional FARC captives, and the need to increase cooperation on narcotics issues. Delahunt discussed inter-parliamentary relations, FARC kidnappings, and a possible meeting between National Assembly President Cilia Flores and Speaker Nancy Pelosi with five deputies, including a member of Podemos. The Venezuelans would like to restart the "Boston Group" for legislative exchanges between the two countries. Delahunt and the Ambassador also had lunch with opposition mayor Leopoldo Lopez to discuss the current political environment in Venezuela and Lopez' politically-based ban on running for other elected offices. END SUMMARY

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CHAVEZ MEETING  
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12. (C) Delahunt, Chairman of the Subcommittee on International Organizations, Human Rights, and Oversight of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, met privately with President Chavez for a little over two hours on January 18 at Chavez' invitation to discuss a variety of issues, including Chavez' efforts to negotiate the release of hostages being held by the FARC. Foreign Minister Maduro and Minister of the Presidency Chacon also attended the meeting. Following the meeting, Delahunt provided the Ambassador with a readout. According to Delahunt, Chavez was very interested in the coming U.S. elections.

13. (C) President Chavez indicated that he will continue his efforts to secure the release of additional FARC hostages. Delahunt told the Ambassador that he believes there will be another hostage release in the near future. At one point, Delahunt stated his belief that the release would occur before summer.

14. (C) Delahunt also said he pressed Chavez to expand BRV contacts with the USG, particularly the Embassy. According to Delahunt, President Chavez instructed Foreign Minister Maduro to contact the Embassy in order to discuss possible areas of cooperation in the area of counter-narcotics.

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MEETING WITH HOSTAGES' FAMILIES

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¶5. (C) Immediately following his meeting with President Chavez, Delahunt, accompanied by Venezuelan Ambassador to the U.S. Bernardo Alvarez, met with the families of three Colombian FARC hostages. After listening to their accounts of how their relatives became hostages, Delahunt stated the USG firmly supported their efforts to secure the release of their relatives. He stressed that efforts to secure the release of the hostages was non-political and that both President Bush and the Department of State were doing everything in their power to advance the release of the hostages.

¶6. (C) Delahunt also opined that President Chavez had a "big heart" and cared deeply about the issue. When one woman expressed concern over her husband's poor health, Delahunt suggested the family members write Raul Castro and request that he offer to bring the hostages to Havana for medical treatment.

¶7. (C) While waiting for the family members, Alvarez confided to Delahunt that his uncle was kidnapped years ago and Alvarez was involved in the negotiations for his release. Alvarez stated the family did not pay a ransom because the uncle was rescued. Alvarez repeatedly stressed that President Chavez cared deeply about the hostages and their families. He also stated the mother of Clara Rojas refused to return to Colombia to wait for her daughter's release because she said the Venezuelans were "the only ones who cared".

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Restarting the Boston Group  
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¶8. (C) Delahunt and the Ambassador met with five members of the National Assembly to discuss bilateral issues and the FARC. The group included four United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) members: Saul Ortega, Calixto Ortega, Eleazar Nieves, and Francisco Torrealba, as well as one member from the pro-government but ostracized party Podemos, Juan Jose Molina. Polcouns and Calixto Ortega staffer Julio Lares also attended. (NOTE: Podemos supports Chavez but has been stripped of all of its parliamentary committee seats (septel) for campaigning against Chavez' unsuccessful constitutional reform package. END NOTE).

¶9. (C) After briefly discussing the U.S. election campaigns and domestic Venezuelan politics, the group turned to the recent release of FARC hostages. Delahunt reminded the group that he had met with the FARC years ago at the request of then Colombian President Pastrana and said he has been extremely critical of the FARC as they continue their practice of kidnapping. He noted pointedly that shortly after releasing two hostages, the FARC promptly kidnapped six more people. Delahunt also stated Cuban President Castro had said to him that it was difficult to reason with the FARC. According to Delahunt, Castro stated the FARC were "from another world." Calixto Ortega said his group condemned the kidnappings absolutely and noted Venezuela is also a victim of the practice. (NOTE: This contradicts Chavez' claim that the FARC harbors no Venezuelan victims. END NOTE)

¶10. (C) Turning to bilateral relations, Calixto and others stated their clear interest in improving exchanges between the National Assembly and Congress, specifically by restarting the so-called "Boston Group." Delahunt agreed, but lamented the fact there were no opposition representatives in the National Assembly; the "Boston Group" had facilitated discussions between pro-government and opposition members. Delahunt and the Venezuelans agreed to form a new group. Torrealba raised the possibility of a meeting between National Assembly President Flores and House Speaker Pelosi, possibly in May or June.

¶11. (C) Delahunt, the Ambassador, and Polcouns also met with opposition mayor Leopoldo Lopez. (NOTE: Ambassador Alvarez had recommended that Delahunt meet with Lopez. END NOTE) Lopez left the Primero Justicia party in 2007 to join Governor Rosales' Un Nuevo Tiempo party. Lopez briefed the representative on widespread national problems such as crime, inflation, and housing shortages and his attempts to deal with them in his borough. (NOTE: Caracas is divided into five boroughs. Each of the boroughs has its own mayor in addition to an overall mayor for the city. END NOTE) Lopez noted that not only has the Chavez administration failed to address these problems, but it appears to have a lack of interest in doing so. He also briefed Delahunt on his efforts to reach out to city and state officials in the United States and the rest of Latin America to increase exchanges and discuss best practices.

¶12. (C) Lopez was keenly interested in discussing his personal political situation with Delahunt since he knew Delahunt was scheduled to meet President Chavez later in the day. Lopez stated he wants to run for the position of overall mayor of Caracas next fall but is unable to do so because he is currently banned from running for any type of political office until 2017. He was administratively banned for misusing public funds. (COMMENT: There are no allegations that Lopez was guilty of corruption. He basically used central government-dispersed funds for a different purpose. END COMMENT). Lopez claimed the administrative action violated the Venezuelan constitution since it requires a court procedure and ruling. He is currently contesting the ban before the Venezuelan Supreme Court and is considering taking his case to the OAS if he fails to obtain a local judicial remedy. He noted that current polls indicate that he would receive more than 50 % of the vote if he were allowed to run.

¶13. (U) Representative Delahunt did not clear on this report before departing Caracas.

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